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AUTHOR Bradbard, Marilyn R.; Endsley, Richard C.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a survey which was conducted to determine what licensers in different states say to parents who call them seeking help in selecting a day care program for their children, and confirms the assumption that parents have few resources available to help them select good day care. A questionnaire regarding the kinds of information that licensers are able to provide parents was sent to state day care licensing agencies in each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Responses to the survey indicate that with a few exceptions, state day care licensing agencies have written or unwritten policies which prevent licensers from providing parents with information on the quality of specific local day care centers or recommending one center over another. In most cases, then, licensing guidelines do not provide parents with a tool they can use to distinguish those centers that barely meet minimum standards from those that go far beyond minimum standards. (CM)

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What Do Licensers Say To Parents Who Ask Their Help in Selecting Quality Day Care?

Marilyn R. Bradbard Richard C. Endsley

University of Georgia

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For the past two years we have been actively involved in various phases of a research project which ultimately resulted in the development of a parent guide to quality day care centers (Bradbard & Endsley, 1978a,b,c). One of the basic assumptions underlying the project was that parents have few resources available to help them make the best day care selections for their young children (Keyserling, 1972). This assumption was clearly substantiated both by informal conversations and more formal interviews with parents in our community who repeatedly stated they could make day care decisions with more confidence and less guilt if they could be provided with some specific information on what to look for when selecting a center. However, these parents were generally unaware of what information they needed, or if, in fact, it existed.

One resource we considered recommending to parents in our guide was their local day care licensing worker. Unfortunately, we had insufficient knowledge of what kinds of information licensing workers generally feel free and competent to give parents, and to what extent this information varied from state to state. Accordingly, we decided to conduct a survey to determine what licensers in different states say to parents who call them seeking help in selecting a day care program for their children.

Method

A three page questionnaire was mailed to the executive director[1] of the state day care licensing agency in each of the 50 states and the District of

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[1] In some cases the questionnaires were routed from executive directors to assistant directors, department heads, etc. to be completed. However, in all cases, the person completing the questionnaire was in a supervisory position in the state's central office and qualified to answer policy questions.

Columbia. A cover letter which accompanied the questionnaire briefly explained that we wanted to obtain information on the role that state day care licensing agencies play in dispersing information on day care quality to parents of young children.

Included in the questionnaire were basic questions concerning the agency and personnel (i.e., name of agency, name and job responsibility of person completing the questionnaire, educational background of licensers). We then asked the following questions concerning each agency's policies regarding information that their licensers are able to provide parents:

1. Are day care licensers in this state allowed to give out information on the quality of specific day care centers to parents who request this information (e.g., ABC Day Care is a poor center because ...)?
2. Are day care licensers in this state allowed to give out a list of all licensed day care centers in the locale to parents who request aid in selecting a day care program?
3. Are day care licensers in this state allowed to give out a copy of state licensing guidelines to parents who request aid in selecting a day care program?
4. Are day care licensers in this state encouraged to suggest additional sources of information (e.g., books, local public interest groups, neighbors, doctors, Yellow Pages, etc.) to parents who request aid in selecting a day care program? If "yes," what additional sources do licensers usually recommend?
5. Briefly describe what a typical day care licenser in your state might say to a parent who phones asking the following question: "Can you suggest a good day care program for my preschool child?"

Ample space was provided on the questionnaire form for the respondents to comment on each of the above questions in addition to their "yes" or "no" responses.

Respondents were urged to complete their questionnaire within one month. At the end of the month a reminder letter was sent to all agency directors who had not responded (approximately 50 percent). All but two of the questionnaires were returned after this reminder letter was sent. The information from the remaining two states was subsequently obtained by phone.

Results

The results presented in the following five sections refer to the questions listed in the method.

1. Information on the quality of specific centers. As indicated in Table 1, 48 of the 51 licensing agency directors (94 percent) stated that they are not allowed to provide parents with information on the quality of specific day care centers unless this information relates directly to licensure. In other words, the directors stated that it was generally permissible for their licensers to disclose to parents whether or not a center is licensed, what its licensed capacity is, the number of hours each day it operates, and the training and experience of the center's caregivers. However, the agency directors indicated that their licensers were not allowed to evaluate the quality of specific day care centers or recommend one center over another.

Generally, the reasons given for not allowing the licensers to provide parents with either evaluations or recommendations of center quality were based on (a) conflict of interest situations that might result from licensers working directly with both center operators and parents, (b) the absence of specific criteria upon which to evaluate centers that are already licensed to meet some specific standards, and (c) fear of legal action from center operators.

A few examples of the justifications given by agency directors for not evaluating the quality of licensed centers or recommending one center over another are given below:

"No written policy prevents this, but training does. Such statements would place the licenser in a conflict of interest position ..."

"We do not have a graded system of licensing. It would be inappropriate to label centers in terms of excellence without criteria upon which to base the 'grade.'"

"...if a facility is licensed it must meet criteria. We cannot bias or slander a facility's name."

"This information could not be given out as it could be interpreted as a recommendation and this we are not at liberty to make."

Further; even the respondents from the three states who replied that their licensers are allowed to provide parents with information on the quality of specific day care centers gave qualified responses. For example, one of these respondents stated, "we have no formal ruling on this issue--staff feel free to emphasize on agency's {strong points} ..." This respondent went on to say that licensers "avoid making negative statements if the facility is fully licensed."

2. List of licensed centers. The data in Table 1 show that all but one of the 51 day care licensing agency directors responded that licensers in their states could provide parents with a list of all local licensed day care facilities. The only apparent exception came from the respondent from Tennessee who stated, "we are allowed to give out only a list of those licensed centers who are in compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964."

3. State day care licensing guidelines. As indicated in Table 1, all of the respondents stated that their licensers are allowed to provide

parents with a copy of state licensing guidelines. However, nine agency directors (Alaska, Georgia, Idaho, Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin) volunteered the information that because their guidelines are, perhaps, too technical, they had developed their own simplified checklists or brochures for parents to use in lieu of, or in addition to, licensing regulations.

4. Additional sources of information. Thirty-eight of the 48 directors who responded to this question (79 percent) stated that they did, in fact, encourage licensers in their states to recommend other sources of information beyond the licensing guidelines or their own brochures to help parents select day care programs for their children (see Table 1). For example, 15 respondents (Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Hawaii, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Dakota, Ohio, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming) said their licensers would recommend that parents contact local child care associations, child advocacy groups, and/or local 4-C groups. Three respondents (Kansas, Kentucky, and Mississippi) also suggested that they would recommend parents contact local doctors, clinics, health departments, universities, and/or attend local child care or parent education courses. An additional two respondents (South Carolina and Virginia) said they would recommend specific books, booklets or articles to parents on day care selection. Finally, only 23 respondents spontaneously commented that their licensers were encouraged to recommend to parents that they visit and observe in a variety of centers in their communities to determine which one would best meet their needs.

The remaining ten respondents (21 percent) replied that licensers in their states were not encouraged to recommend additional sources of information to parents who request aid in selecting day care programs (see Table 1). Three of these 10 respondents mentioned that their states had not firmly

established policies concerning other sources of information that could be recommended to parents. Five others mentioned that when their own materials (i.e., list of licensed centers, licensing guidelines) were made available to parents and/or the suggestion was made that parents visit centers, they saw no need to recommend additional sources of information.

5. What do licensers say to a parent who asks, "Can you suggest a good day care program ..." As would be expected by the responses to the preceding questions, only a few respondents would say, "yes, we can recommend a program." However, based on a composite of the agency directors responses to this question, it appears that licensers in most states are encouraged to answer a parent's request in the following manner:

> We are not free to recommend a particular center to you. However, we can provide you with a list of all licensed day care centers in your area. If you can be more specific about the type of care you are looking for (e.g., group day care, family day care), the amount you can pay for care, the number of hours your child will need care each day, and the size center you prefer, we can tell you which centers in your area meet your needs. A copy of our minimum licensing standards might also help you to understand how programs in your area are operating in comparison to the standards.

Discussion

Our results are clear: With few exceptions, state day care licensing agencies have written or unwritten policies which prevent licensers from providing parents with information on the quality of specific local day care centers or recommending one center over another. However, agency policies generally enable licensers to provide parents with a list of all licensed day care centers in the area and a copy of state licensing

guidelines. Somewhat less frequently, licensers are able to recommend that parents use other community resources (e.g., local child advocacy groups, doctors, clinics, unviersity professionals) to obtain information on quality day care. However, since many states have not set policies on the kinds of resources licensers are able to recommend, any referrals probably depend on individual licensers' knowledge of resources that are available in the community.

These results, in combination with our basic assumption that parents have few resources available to help them make the best day care choices for their children, make our next question obvious: Suppose the conscientious parent obtains a list of all licensed centers in the community as well as a copy of state licensing guidelines from the local licensing agents--what is the likelihood that this information will help her (him) select one of the better local day care programs? Certainly, informing parents which centers are licensed will help them avoid those centers that might be unlicensed. However, can we expect parents to be better able to select the better licensed program from the poorer licensed programs simply by having the licensing guidelines in hand? We think not for the following reasons.

First, having the licensing guidelines in hand does not insure that parents will use them to visit, observe, and compare a variety of day care centers in their communities. In fact, our conversations with parents over the past few years have revealed that many parents never visit the day care centers they select for their children prior to enrolling their children in them. Instead, these parents often make arrangements to enroll their children in day care programs over the phone. Further, if our questionnaire results are any indication, a large number of licensers fail to take advantage of the opportunity to encourage parents who call them to visit and compare licensed centers.

Second, even if licensers did systematically encourage parents to visit and compare licensed centers, we question whether having the licensing guidelines in hand will be an aide to them. Certainly, the "complexity" argument of licensing guidelines may often mitigate their potential usefulness to parents. However, a much more important reason for the limited usefulness of placing licensing guidelines in the hands of the parents is that the guidelines were not designed to differentiate programs which barely meet standards from those that easily exceed them. More specifically, most licensing guidelines and procedures are designed to set a "floor" under day care quality--a minimum standard below which centers are not allowed to operate (A Survey, 1971). Further, this quality "floor is generally defined primarily in terms of health and safety features of a center rather than in terms of the skill of the caregivers or the quality of educational programs. Thus, in most cases, the licensing guidelines do not provide parents with a tool that they can use to distinguish those centers that barely meet minimum standards from those that go far beyond minimum standards.[2]

One noteworthy exception is the state of Tennessee whose licensers grade all licensed centers by quality level. More specifically, each center receives an A, B, or C rating depending upon the quality of the program. Information

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[2]We realize that even those centers that barely meet minimum standards to operate can provide a service to some families, particularly those in which preschool children would be left to care for themselves or older siblings would be kept home from school to care for younger children. However, the point we want to make clear is that among licensed centers, and for the price that parents are willing and able to pay (assuming the community has a choice of centers), it is often possible for parents to select a day care program that provides services which far surpass minimum standards.

regarding the rating and the criteria for obtaining the rating are readily available to anyone inquiring. Further, the licenses (with the rating on it) must be posted in a conspicuous place in the center. Thus, simply by looking at the license, parents are able to obtain information on the relative quality of licensed day care centers.

Except for Tennessee,[3] our findings appear consistent with those of Costin (1970) who noted that licensing agencies are usually not given, nor do they want, the responsibility of classifying centers by grade or merit beyond the minimum certification for a license. In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of our findings is that licensing is not perceived by licensers as primarily a service to parents. Rather, it appears that licensing is often viewed as an "administrative program in which a specific regulatory function is managed ... a system of social policies {that} focuses on the community at large, not the individual" (Costin, 1970, p. 67).

Conclusion

The purpose of the present paper was not to argue that licensers should assume the consumer advocate role of helping parents get the "best day care for their money." Our intent was to confirm our original assumption that parents have few resources available (including day care licensers) to help them select day care. Therefore, it is our hope that professionals and organizations that advocate quality child care consider the implications of the lack of this type of parenting information and take a more active role in developing and testing materials and programs to help parents become better day care "consumers" on behalf of their children.

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[3]There are indications that other state day care licensing agencies (e.g., New Hampshire, West Virginia, New Jersey, California) have or are planning to develop day care "grading" systems in the near future.

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Table 1

Summary of Questionnaire Information

	1		2		3		4		
	Are licensers allowed to provide parents with information on quality?		Are licensers allowed to provide parents with a list of licensed centers?		Are licensers allowed to provide parents with state licensing guidelines?		Are licensers encouraged to suggest additional sources of information?		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	NA
Alabama		x	x		x		x		
Alaska		x	x		x		x		
Arizona		x	x		x		x		
Arkansas		x	x		x		x		
California		x	x		x		x		
Colorado		x	x		x		x		
Connecticut		x	x		x		x		
Delaware		x	x		x		x		
D. C.		x	x		x		x		
Florida	x		x		x		x		
Georgia		x	x		x			x	
Hawaii		x	x		x		x		
Idaho		x	x		x		x		
Illinois		x	x		x		x		
Indiana		x	x		x		x		
Iowa		x	x		x		x		
Kansas		x	x		x		x		
Kentucky		x	x		x		x		
Louisiana		x	x		x			x	
Maine		x	x		x			x	
Maryland		x	x		x				x

Table (continued)

	1		2		3		4		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	NA
Massachusetts		x	x		x		x		
Michigan		x	x		x		x		
Minnesota		x	x		x		x		
Mississippi		x	x		x		x		
Missouri		x	x		x				x
Montana		x	x		x		x		
Nebraska		x	x		x			x	
Nevada		x	x		x			x	
New Hampshire		x	x		x		x		
New Jersey		x	x		x		x		
New Mexico		x	x		x		x		
New York		x	x		x		x		
North Carolina		x	x		x		x		
North Dakota		x	x		x		x		
Ohio		x	x		x		x		
Oklahoma		x	x		x			x	
Oregon		x	x		x			x	
Pennsylvania		x	x		x		x		
Rhode Island		x	x		x				x
South Carolina		x	x		x		x		
South Dakota		x	x		x		x		
Tennessee		x		x	x		x		
Texas		x	x		x			x	

Table 1 (continued)

	1		2		3		4		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	NA
Utah		x	x		x		x		
Vermont	x		x		x			x	
Virginia		x	x		x		x		
Washington	x		x		x		x		
West Virginia		x	x		x			x	
Wisconsin		x	x		x		x		
Wyoming		x	x		x		x		
TOTALS	3	48	50	1	51	0	38	10	3